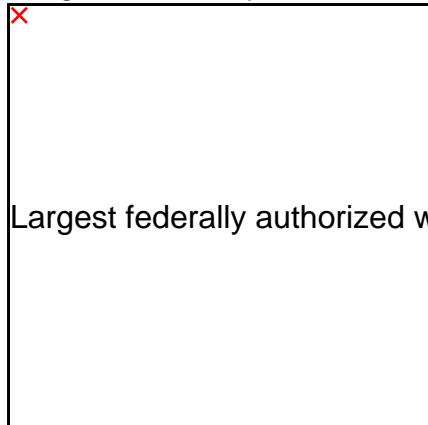


Largest federally authorized wetland mitigation bank in Washington approved



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Contact: Patricia Graesser, Army Corps of Engineers, (206) 764-3760  
Sandy Howard, Department of Ecology, (360) 407-6239  
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SEATTLE--State and federal agencies came together this week to establish the biggest wetland mitigation bank ever federally authorized in Washington State.

On April 4, the Seattle District, Army Corps of Engineers, the Washington Department of Ecology, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Environmental Protection Agency signed the Washington State Department of Transportation's North Fork Newaukum Mitigation Banking Instrument and Memorandum of Agreement. Other signatories to the agreement include the Washington Department of Fish & Wildlife and Federal Highways Administration.

The purpose of the North Fork Newaukum Mitigation Bank is to provide compensation for impacts to wetlands and other aquatic resources resulting from the Washington State Department of Transportation highway construction projects in the Upper Chehalis watershed. WSDOT anticipates using credits from the bank for highway projects in the Service Area of the North Fork Newaukum Mitigation Bank, primarily the proposed widening of Interstate 5, from Toutle Park to Maytown.

The Newaukum bank is located adjacent to the North and Middle Forks of the Newaukum River, east of the city of Chehalis, Wash. The bank site is 230 acres with 171 acres generating credits for a total of 78 credits.

Mitigation banking involves the restoration, enhancement, creation, and preservation of aquatic ecosystem functions to compensate in advance for similar adverse impacts caused by activities authorized by regulatory agencies.

This large bank lays the foundation for a dozen mitigation banks coming in for approval in the near future. The Corps is reviewing 12 mitigation bank proposals and holding discussions with prospective bankers about several additional mitigation bank projects for western Washington.

"The Seattle District believes that an effective mitigation banking program is vital to helping it protect the aquatic environment, efficiently administer its regulatory program, and provide the regulated public with fair, timely, and reasonable decisions," said Muffy Walker, Seattle District Regulatory Branch chief.

The ecological goals of the bank are to restore wetlands, and to enhance wetlands, shoreline, riparian upland and upland buffer adjacent to both the North Fork and Middle Fork of the Newaukum River. All Newaukum bank construction and planting activities have been completed and the bank site is performing very well, according to the Corps.

"This wetland bank restores wetlands before they are lost, and it will help speed future permit approvals for the Department of Transportation," said Gordon White, manager of the Department of Ecology's shorelands program. "The ecological value for the bank site will be preserved for future generations, providing high-quality salmon and wildlife habitat."

Wetland ecosystems help purify water, control flooding, stabilize shorelines, recharge underground water and maintain stream flows. They also provide habitat for fish and wildlife species, including endangered species.

Guided media tours of the North Fork Newaukum mitigation site are available by request. Please call Jilayne Jordan at 360-905-2078 in Vancouver, Wash., to set up a tour.

Photos of the signing ceremony are available from the Corps of Engineers--(206) 764-3760